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RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 0010
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0018
RUEHUM/AMEMBASSY ULAANBAATAR PRIORITY 0005
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0010

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SUBJECT: NORTH KOREAN REFUGEE FLOW INTO THAILAND SURGES

REF: A. BANGKOK 2404, B. 06 CHIANG MAI 79, C. CHIANG MAI 50

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CLASSIFIED BY: John Spykerman, Political Officer, CG Chiang Mai,
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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The ever-increasing North Korean refugee flow into Thailand is disrupting the RTG's ability to handle the wave of those seeking to use Thailand as a conduit to resettlement in a third country. Many sources believe the new RTG plan to process resettlement cases with Republic of Korea (ROK) at the point of detainment without involvement of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) will eventually break down under the pressure of thousands of North Koreans reportedly waiting in southern China for their chance to slip into Thailand. If the path to South Korean resettlement becomes rockier, more refugees may seek assistance outside of this process, opening the door to more requests for resettlement to other countries and exposing the refugees to greater trafficking and health risks as their stopover in Thailand becomes longer and less controlled. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) PolOff visited Chiang Rai in mid-May to assess recent changes in RTG policies regarding the processing of North Korean refugees for resettlement in South Korea (ref A). The new policy directs the resettlement process to occur at the point of entry and eliminates UNHCR's facilitating role in the North Koreans' resettlement requests. Under the agreement, local police arrest refugees after they enter Thailand, the local courts then charge and convict the refugees with illegally entering the country, refugees pay a fine or serve a few days in a local jail, and are then sent to the Immigration Detention Center (IDC) in Mae Sai for resettlement processing by ROK officials. Under the previous system, refugees were held at the Mae Sai IDC only until a large enough group was ready to be sent to the Bangkok IDC for processing by the UNHCR and ROK. The new system is supposed to reduce the number of days refugees are under RTG care -- often more than 30 days under the previous system -- although it is not apparent local facilities or budgets are able to house ever increasing numbers of North Koreans, or whether the time served under detainment will actually be any shorter.

Some 700 Refugees Likely to Be Detained This Year

13. (S) The number of North Korean refugees entering Thailand has grown dramatically in recent years, now averaging 60 new detainees in Chiang Rai province each month. Thai border enforcement caught 40 refugees crossing the Mekong River into Thailand in all of 2003. By 2006, the number of refugees surrendering to police in Chiang Rai had increased to 367. In the first four months of 2007, immigration officials at the Mae Sai border crossing say they processed some 235 North Korean refugees, with another 58 people currently housed at the local detention center. Officials expect to detain more than 700 North Koreans by year's end. In addition to these, an unknown number of North Koreans have made directly for Bangkok, where they either turn themselves in to immigration police there or seek shelter at safe houses run by missionaries. Sources vary widely on how many North Koreans are in China preparing to seek resettlement via Thailand. Some media reports tag the number at up to 100,000, but Consulate General Chengdu notes the ROK CG in Chengdu pegged the figure at closer to 4,000 in Yunnan Province.

14. (C) Despite this growth, refugee demographics remain consistent. Refugees are overwhelmingly female and aged 25-55, with small numbers of older men and children. Chiang Rai officials involved in the detainment process say most are from rural areas in North Korea, but appear to be at least modestly educated. Sources familiar with refugee trafficking networks explain that women are better able to find employment and occasionally husbands during their long trek through China and thus able to support the costs of travel, while many working-age males cannot escape military and farming commitments in North Korea. Immigration officials say most refugees arrive with only minor health concerns, such as malnourishment or dehydration, although they monitor children and the elderly for further signs of illness.

A Better Understanding of the Causes, But Not Much Progress on the Solutions

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15. (C) In a similar trip to Chiang Rai last year, PolOff noted that provincial officials were perplexed at why they were dealing with refugees from a country that does not border Thailand (ref B). This year, in contrast, everyone from the governor down to mid-level immigration officers is well-informed about the path North Koreans follow on a months-long trek across China and eventually into Thailand. Many officials express a rueful sense of pride that North Koreans single out Thailand as an oasis of compassionate understanding in a region of unsympathetic governments that would likely push the refugees back, even though this compassion (or rather, lack of overt hostility) is what drives more refugees to come here and cause headaches for Thai bureaucrats.

16. (C) However, this greater understanding has not led to noticeably better solutions. Although the new policy requires ROK processing to occur at Mae Sai (along with another detention center in central Thailand for those detained in and around Bangkok), many Chiang Rai officials have not had contact with ROK Embassy representatives. In fact, local police officers are still at a loss on how to cope with the language barrier, mostly relying on local Korean expats who charge up to \$20 USD per hour for translation, or how to handle increased food and transportation expenses for arresting the refugees. Chiang Rai officials say their border security budgets must absorb these additional costs, while last year's promises of increased ROK interpretation and dietary assistance have yet to materialize.

17. (C) There is also a disconnect between a process that encourages more refugees to enter Thailand and the approach preferred by local police and military officers, especially in the Third Army, who would deny more refugees entry. Chiang Rai's police chief even speaks longingly of U.S. anti-illegal immigration tactics used on the Mexican border. Police told PolOff they are aware of a number of South Korean expats and

religious organizations in northern Thailand -- nominally serving on missions to ethnic minority groups -- that are likely bases of support for traffickers, but that Bangkok is not interested in a more confrontational investigation of the organizations' operations. Police likewise see little hope of working with Lao and Burmese border officials to better monitor incoming refugee groups. Officials in those two countries prefer to ignore the refugees and allow them to continue on downriver to Thailand, recognizing that to detain them would be to become responsible for them.

An Already Crowded Detention Center

18. (C) The Mae Sai IDC is ill-prepared to house large numbers of refugees, despite RTG assurances otherwise. Formerly used as a stop for illegal Burmese migrant workers who would be deported the next day, the IDC is now home to dozens of North Koreans who spend weeks at a time there. The two detention rooms, separated by gender, are located on the second floor of the IDC. Each room is about 100 square meters and, according to immigration officials, able to hold 100 people. This stated capacity, however, is unrealistic for holding detainees over long periods of time under humane conditions. On the day PolOff visited, both rooms were packed with 48 North Korean women and children housed on one side, while 10 North Korean males were in the other room with a large group of ethnic Shan migrant workers from Burma detained for the day. On the women's side, detainees took turns sleeping on the floor, while others huddled together or tended to the half-dozen toddlers crawling over their resting mothers. Refugees receive three meals a day, but must spend their entire period of detention in these unfurnished (except for a toilet and sink) rooms. Immigration sources say if the IDC becomes more crowded they will house some detainees off-site. With most North Koreans hoping for a quick exit from Thailand, officials anticipate little flight risk at these low-security, improvised detainment centers. Of greater concern for them is where to find the budget to establish these overflow sites.

Security and Safety Concerns Emerging

19. (C) Local officials recognize that even with on-site resettlement processing, any further increase in refugees will overwhelm their system. Chiang Rai's police chief said that completion of the R3A highway connecting China and Thailand through Laos later this year will lead to far greater numbers of

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refugees, who now make the 400-km trip mostly by riverboat (ref C). With few options for housing detainees beyond the IDC and word spreading quickly about the undesirable conditions there, officials expect more refugees will try to make their own way to Bangkok or seek assistance and shelter from organizations throughout the country, instead of immediately turning themselves in to police at the border as most do now. Claiming that the U.S. policy of resettling ethnic Hmong from Laos encouraged more Hmong to enter Thailand illegally, Chiang Rai Gov. Amorapun Nimanandh predicted that more North Koreans will look to the United States if refugees encounter problems with the current resettlement processing.

110. (C) Police also highlighted several areas of concern for refugees' safety in the event that greater numbers overwhelm the system. With the ROK offering thousands of dollars to resettled refugees, more profit-oriented individuals are getting involved in trafficking operations and charging a cut of this allotment as repayment for their services. If the processing operation breaks down or faces significant delays, many North Koreans will find themselves stuck in Thailand facing significant debts -- opening the door to further trafficking-in-persons risks. Chiang Rai's police chief also worried that the ability to distinguish legitimate refugees from people with other motives would diminish if immigration officials become even more pressed for resources.

Comment: More Refugees, More Headaches

¶11. (C) The recent tweaking of RTG refugee procedures to process resettlement cases at the border may keep the problem out of sight in the capital, but the larger issue at stake is that this program designed to handle a few dozen cases at a time ignores the thousands of North Koreans reportedly waiting for their turn to come down the Mekong River. Those who have spoken with the refugees say South Korea remains their preferred resettlement choice due to three factors: family connections between the two Koreas, the financial incentive of the ROK's resettlement payment, and the for-now endurable RTG arrest and detainment process. However, if conditions worsen in terms of the length of detainment and crowding in IDC cells, refugees will likely seek out new routes and head to Bangkok or elsewhere, overwhelming RTG border security and creating headaches for UNHCR offices and foreign missions anyway.

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